

Ducks on the Pond by The Stephanois (ballantine)

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

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Summary:

Steve Harrington knows two things to be true: the St. Louis Cardinals are the best baseball team in the world, and Nancy Wheeler is far too amazing for him to hog all to himself.

1. Game 1 of the 1985 World Series aka Saturday, October 19th

Notes for the Chapter:

Ducks on the Pond is a baseball term referring to when multiple runners are on bases and ready to score. Its use as the title here is continuing the proud tradition of American teenagers using baseball euphemisms for sex.

Steve Harrington knows two things to be true: the St. Louis Cardinals are the best baseball team in the world, and Nancy Wheeler is far too amazing to hog all to himself.

He can admit it. He's a generous guy like that.

"Sus-su-sudio," Steve sings into an air mic by way of announcing himself. He jumps and slides down the stair railing, landing beside Nancy with a flourish. He throws an arm around her shoulders and grins at Jonathan, who doesn't so much as blink.

"I'm losing the will to live," Jonathan says to Nancy.

Undeterred, Steve throws his other arm around his shoulders. He gamely ignores how said shoulders immediately tense up.

"How can you still hate Phil Collins after I played you guys the whole album?"

"I didn't really have an opinion on Phil Collins before hearing the whole album," Jonathan says. "But now I can safely say I hate him."

Steve shakes his head. "That's like hating — I don't know, romance. Tenderness. *Love itself*. Don't you ever want to listen to something that's not angry?"

"The Clash isn't angry," Jonathan mutters, ducking his head. His hair immediately falls into his eyes, because he's never heard of mousse. Steve would introduce him to it, but too much time spent with the

other boy in the past year and a half has distorted his taste. He *likes* the stupid, floppy hair. It's a sickness, really.

"As much as I'm enjoying this week's round of music wars, I can't stay," Nancy says, promptly shattering Steve's heart into a million tiny pieces. "My mom needs me to babysit Mike and Holly while she and my dad go to couples' counseling. Then they're going to try one of their 'date nights'." She says the last part with a restrained sort of contempt.

The Wheeler household has been in kind of a rough state over the past year and a half. Turns out hearing that your children have been off fighting nightmare creatures and chasing government secrets through the woods at night strains a marriage.

At least that's what Steve assumes; his own parents remain blissfully ignorant of the entire affair. The last time his father had really talked to him, he clapped Steve on the shoulder and congratulated him on snagging "that Nicole girl". This had been approximately a year into their official dating.

"We can come over, help out with the twerps," Steve says. Jonathan shifts on his feet at the word 'we', but does not correct him. *Progress.*

"Me alone with two boys while Mike does god-knows-what in the basement," Nancy says, disbelieving. "Right, like that's going to happen."

"Hey, I thought your mom liked me. She thinks I'm a stand-up kinda guy."

Jonathan and Nancy do their eerie dual side-eye thing, but they're messing with the wrong Harrington. Steve's a pro. He's immune to shame.

Nancy breaks off and cuts her eyes away. "Wait until after 3, then knock on the basement door."

"Stealthy. I like it."

"And uh, Jonathan?" Nancy glances at him and bites her lip. Steve watches Jonathan's eyes dart down and then away and suppresses a

grin. "Are you coming?"

Jonathan slides out from under Steve's arm. "Can't, I told Mr. Johnson I'd put in a couple hours at work to make up for the ones I'll be missing next week."

Next week, meaning the epic cram-fest Nancy and he have planned. The two of them are studying for the SATs or APs or some other collection of letters that really just amounts to them being intimidatingly smart and wanting to get out of Indiana. (Steve had offered to smuggle in beer to the library, but they'd just done that side-eye thing again.)

Most people probably wouldn't recognize the look of disappointment in Nancy's eyes at Jonathan's response, but most people aren't her incredibly sensitive and amazing boyfriend.

He thwaps the other boy on the upper arm. "Come by after, we'll hang."

"Hang?" Jonathan says the word like it's German or something.

"Dude, Game One of the World Series, remember?"

Steve had been surprised to find out that Jonathan even *liked* baseball, given the unrestrained loathing with which he regarded P.E. and all school sports. When Steve asked, he'd only muttered something about his father in a vaguely embarrassed tone.

Steve lets it drop. Fathers, man. More stress than they're worth.

Anyway, it doesn't matter how or why you get into baseball. The only thing that really matters is that you don't support any disgraceful teams, like the Cubs or Mets or those bogus losers, the Royals. (Which is coincidentally the team the Cards are playing and totally beating tonight.)

Jonathan's face clears and he nods. "Right, the game."

"So you'll come?" Nancy says. Steve hugs her to his side a little tighter and together they look at him hopefully.

Jonathan stares between the two of them, eyes oddly wide, and then looks away, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Yeah, sure,” he says eventually. He angles a small smile down at the ground like someone’s going to steal it if it’s not hidden. “I’ll come.”

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Steve knocks on the basement door at three-oh-five and is greeted by an assortment of flat, unimpressed faces. The four boys regard him suspiciously for a few seconds, leaving him to hang out on the doorstep like the world’s coolest mailman or something.

He doesn’t really get what’s up with Nancy’s little brother and his weird little friends. He’s tried to be friendly with them, on account of Jonathan’s little brother and his ongoing trauma or whatever. But they persist in treating him like an interloper, like he hadn’t faced down that monster freak and swung for the fences. It’s, you know, whatever. It’s not like he *needs* the approval of four freshman.

“You gonna let me in or what?” He asks. “Nancy’s expecting Jonathan and me, so, you know. I got credentials.”

See, Steve can be smart. He just invoked the power of *two* older siblings. And because the kids are also smart, they part like the Red Sea and let him through.

He gets out of that basement real quick though; it always feels strange down there. If he didn’t know better, or wasn’t suppressing dark hysterical questions about what else is lurking out in the shadows of the world, he’d say the place is haunted.

Upstairs is better. It’s got Nancy in a soft cashmere sweater, curled up on the couch and reading. He flops down lengthwise, nudges his head under the book in her lap, and closes his eyes like he’s home. He starts to hum happily.

“I think Jonathan’s right,” Nancy says after a moment. “You really need to get off this Phil Collins kick.”

He opens his eyes and looks up at her in outrage. *Traitor!*

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He'd stopped by the store and rented a couple movies for the occasion — one for before the game, and one for after, in the hopes that there would be time before Nancy's parents got home. It had been a tough choice. He'd skipped over Ghostbusters because, no thanks, he's got enough nightmares from real life. Ditto for Nightmare on Elm Street. He'd considered Sixteen Candles before realizing that was totally sending the wrong message to Jonathan, even if Molly Ringwald's character reminded him a little of Nancy.

"So you rented a movie about the Prohibition and another about a ...mermaid?" Nancy flips the VHS of the latter, a quizzical look on her face as she studies the cover.

"It's got Tom Hanks," he points out, figuring that settles the matter. "So which do you want to save to watch with Jonathan?"

She smiles up at him. "Oh, *definitely* the mermaid one."

He chooses not to read into her tone. It's a skill he has.

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Around six, Nancy's parents call to say they're headed to dinner and a movie, and Mike hangs a "Do Not Disturb" sign on the doorknob to the basement.

"Finally," Steve says, and pulls Nancy down onto the couch.

"Steve," Nancy gasps, bracing her arms against his chest. "We can't. Jonathan's going to be here any minute."

"Mm," he replies, kissing down the side of her neck. For all her protests, she eagerly clings to his shoulders when he lifts her up into his lap. He's about three seconds out from slipping a hand under her soft sweater when the basement door opens and —

"Oh *God*, I'm, shit. Sorry — sorry."

Jonathan's gotten a lot better at announcing his presence.

Nancy springs up off the couch, face a bright red. Steve's too high on endorphins and the lingering taste of her mouth to do anything more than sit back and smile at them both. After a few seconds of watching them fidget and carefully not look in each other's direction, Steve happens to spy the clock on the wall.

"Oh shit, the game's about to start," he says, leaping for the remote. When he's settled back down on the couch, he glances up and catches their stares.

"What?"

"...I'll grab some sodas," Nancy says, and makes her escape to the kitchen.

After another few seconds of awkwardly lingering in the doorway of the living room, Jonathan finally gives up and sits down in the armchair. His back is so rigid, Steve could probably use it as a straightedge in shop class.

"You have lipstick on your mouth," Jonathan says. He doesn't look away as Steve wipes his lips, but he does the moment Steve grins over at him.

Nancy returns with three sodas just as Steve has found the game on the TV. She hesitates and then perches on the opposite end of the couch from Steve, like maybe if they don't touch or sit close, Jonathan will forget what he walked in on.

None of this is conducive to Steve's grand plan, so he wriggles down on his cushion and tosses his socked feet up against her thigh. Then he focuses on the game because, seriously, it's the *World Series*.

It's a good night. The Cards win, Tom Hanks is awesome, and Jonathan and Nancy keep blushing whenever they meet each other's eyes.

Steve is a *genius*.

2. Game 2 of the 1985 World Series aka Sunday, October 20th

Before he really got to know Nancy, she was *cute girl, smart and kind* and before that, she was *Will's friend's sister*. It hadn't mattered that they'd been in the same grade since kindergarten, she had been just like everyone else back then: fundamentally unreachable across a gap made of money and normalcy.

Before he really got to know Nancy, he'd shielded himself from loneliness by telling himself that he simply didn't *like* most people. Contempt is the easiest brush in the world to wield, and nothing soothes preemptive hurt like a monochromatic swath of *you're all so predictable and stupid*.

Before he really got to know Nancy, he wasn't used to people sticking around. His father is a useless asshole — absent at the best of times, pushy and self-centered at the worst. His mother has always worked constantly just to make end's meet. She hates not being around but that doesn't change the reality that he's cooked and eaten a lot of meals alone for the better part of a decade.

Before he really got to know Nancy, guys like Steve were the lowest of the low, the type you sneer at in the confines of your own thoughts but never to their faces, the type you reassured yourself would peak in high school and end up pot-bellied and drunk in the same town they were born in.

Now he knows Nancy, and by extension, her boyfriend. And somewhere along the line, a lot of the things — not *all*, but a lot — that pissed him off morphed into things that, well, he doesn't even have a word for it. Sample SAT verbal scores well into the 700s but he doesn't have the right vocabulary for whatever it is he feels towards Steve fucking Harrington.

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“Amigo! Mi casa es su casa,” Steve says grandly, throwing open the door to his parent's house.

Like always, he pronounces the Spanish in a brutally Midwestern fashion, doesn't even attempt to sound like he didn't grow up a Hoosier. Jonathan has spent three years in Spanish class listening to him butcher the language. He always attempts to make up for his accent with enthusiastic gestures and tone, and it never fails to provoke good-natured laughter from the whole class.

It's one of those things Jonathan used to find grating and now just — doesn't.

He slips through the doorway, trying not to let his shoulders bunch up the way they always do whenever he's in a nicer house. It took forever to stop feeling like he should apologize whenever he was in Nancy's, and her house is nothing compared to the Harrington complex, which is huge and gleaming and very, very clean.

"Game on yet?" He asks, even though he knows it is. He feels a need to get words out into the empty air, though, because Nancy isn't coming this evening. It's just going to be him and Steve, and he honestly doesn't know what made him not come up with an excuse to get out of it, except Steve sounded weird on the phone when he'd tried.

Steve throws an arm around his shoulders, the way he insists on doing with the constancy of everything else that's difficult in Jonathan's life.

He tugs him into the living room and says, "Not only is the game on, but I have pizza and beer."

Jonathan detaches himself from Steve's side and sits down on the edge of the couch. He eyes the beer skeptically.

Steve, flopping down right beside him and kicking his feet up onto the coffee table, catches the look. "What? Not your brand?"

"It's a school night," Jonathan says. In the background, Charlie Leibrandt strikes out Cardinal.

"Dude, tomorrow's a Monday. Nothing important happens on a Monday," Steve says. "All the teachers are hungover from their

weekends.”

“The *teachers* are hungover?” Jonathan repeats, disbelieving.

Steve gives him this look like it’s one of the basic truths of the world and he’s sad that Jonathan didn’t know before now. “Yeah, man. Teachers are humans too. What, you don’t think Mr. Kowalski from fifth period doesn’t party hard all weekend?”

Mr. Kowalski from fifth period is 62 years old and often falls asleep halfway through the study hall. Jonathan bites his cheek on a grin and turns his attention back to the television.

Two unmistakable cracks signal Steve opening two cans, and soon enough one appears in front of his nose. When Jonathan glances over, Steve’s got a smile curling on his face. It’s not like his usual, performative one. This one’s smaller, more private, and it never fails to capture Jonathan’s attention.

Steve hoists his can. “To the Cards?”

He rolls his eyes and knocks his can softly against Steve’s. “Another game closer.”

—

The thing to know is, whatever is going on with his feelings about Steve, it’s not the same as what he feels for Nancy. But, yeah, he’s self-aware enough to acknowledge that the two somehow ended up in the same subcategory.

He’s not exactly thrilled. He’s been called a fag too many times to be anything but wary of it.

That he is still excruciatingly attracted to Nancy at the same time just serves to confuse him. Why can’t his stupid fucking heart (and dick) make up its goddamn mind? It’s enough of a complication to make him want to reject it all — Nancy, Steve, and every moment of surprise happiness he’s experienced in the past year and a half. Some days he thinks it would be so much easier to go back to being alone and ignored.

Problem is, Nancy and Steve won't *let him*.

They're headed into the ninth inning and the Cards are down by two.

Steve's brow has suffered a steady collapse over the past half hour, as their chances to make a comeback have dwindled. He scowls darkly at the screen, and Jonathan wisely keeps conversation to a minimum.

Jonathan's on his fourth beer, and he's not *drunk*, but he's not entirely sober either. Drinking isn't really a hobby of his, so it's hitting him harder than he thinks it probably should. If Steve calls him a lightweight, though, he swears he's going to give him a second showing of his fist.

Not that Steve is looking particularly in the mood to tease anyone right now. Because of the game.

The *game*.

Jonathan has to usually try hard to not let the thought of his dad poison his enjoyment of baseball. It would be too easy to let the scant few memories of going to games with him ruin it all — eating hotdogs dripping with mustard and getting sunburnt after hours of cheering in the stands, the lazy arc of the sun calling it a day, a day with his dad.

He resists, because the truth is, baseball is the most beautiful sport he's ever seen.

There's something about the motions, the swing of a bat and power of the ball, the clean sweep of bodies in constant, perfect rotation around the pitcher's mound. A good game makes his fingers itch for his camera. If he could just capture a fraction of the elegance of a perfectly executed Slider, he could be satisfied.

"Oh god," Steve is saying. "Oh god, oh my god."

Jonathan blinks and looks at the television. Somehow the bases are all loaded. He thinks about asking when the fuck *that* happened, but Steve doesn't look like he'd notice if the Upside Down monster came

bursting through the wall right now.

Pendleton's up to bat and Steve's up on his feet, like his body might spontaneously combust if it touches a sofa cushion. He's whispering something into his clasped hands, some kind of prayer or mantra.

Okay, Jonathan likes baseball, but he's not *crazy*. He tries to ignore Steve's fretful dancing a few feet away and stares bemusedly at the television as Leibrandt yields a double to Pendleton and tanks the game for the Royals.

Steve's shout of ecstasy nearly startles him right off the couch. Before he can regain his balance, he's grabbed by the upper arms and pulled into a sort of jumping bear hug, like the two of them had been down there in Kansas City, running the bases and winning the game.

Jonathan doesn't know if it's the beer or the jumping and spinning or just the smell of Steve, but he gets dizzy quick. He shoves back out of the hug before he can fall or worse, get hard.

"Hey, you okay, man?" Steve's got a hand on his elbow like he's infirm, and it's not fair, because Steve had *six* beers. Steve's got that jock-immunity to alcohol or whatever, which is *sad*, or will be in about ten years' time.

"I don't think you should drive home," Steve says. The television is suddenly switched off, and the only noise in the living room is the sound of Jonathan's breathing, which is unnaturally loud in his ears.

He tries to think clearly. "Tomorrow's school, I have to go home." *No way can I stay here.*

Steve says, "No way. I mean, don't get me wrong — before Nancy, I probably would have let you," and they both ignore the fact that before Nancy, they wouldn't have been caught dead hanging out, "but I'm working on being more responsible and shit now."

"I'm *fine*," Jonathan says, a little peevish but already weakening. His head really is spinning an inordinate amount, and he knows he couldn't afford the repair job if he hit a deer or a tree or the side of a building.

Steve studies him for a moment, eyes flicking up and down his face like he's the Mr. Miyagi of drinking. Finally he just announces, "Couch. I'll wake you up early so you can swing by your house before school."

"What about your parents?"

"They won't be home," Steve says with a casually dismissive wave of his hand. Jonathan gets hit with a strong sense of *deja vu*, like he's experienced this exact moment before, but that's probably the beer.

Steve goes off to grab a pillow and blanket and Jonathan has the brief spark of lucidity required to requisition a phone in the dark hallway off the kitchen. After a lot of squinting in the dark, he manages to dial his house.

His mom is home tonight — it's the reason he had to come; Steve somehow knew it was her night off, so Jonathan couldn't use Will as a shield. He tells her he's staying over at Steve's. She's so disgustingly happy that he has a friend, he almost can't take it, so he quickly asks her to put Will on the phone.

It's a relatively new thing they do now, saying goodnight no matter what. Their observance of the ritual is almost religious in nature.

He does his best to sound normal. He thinks he mostly manages it. Will hopefully just assumes he's tired or something. The conversation is quick, and Jonathan says he'll see him tomorrow at school — because they go to the same school now, which is somehow both cool and deeply uncomfortable.

When Jonathan hangs up the phone and turns back to the living room, he is startled to find Steve leaning against the wall a few feet away. His head is tilted a little, and his face is mostly in shadows, but he clearly heard at least the last part of the conversation.

It makes Jonathan want to snap, which is stupid, because it's not like the whole town didn't watch him and his mom fall apart over Will's disappearance. It's not like the fact that he loves his family is something to be ashamed of — but this is Steve, and these are not things you share with other teenage boys. Nancy, maybe.

He doesn't know if Steve picks up on his mood or is just tired and a little drunk himself, because all he says in the end is, "Couch is made up."

After a moment, Jonathan shoves his hands in his pockets and nods his thanks. They don't say goodnight or bump fists or do anything but walk in separate directions through the dark silence of the Harrington house.

3. Game 3 of the 1985 World Series aka Tuesday, October 22, 1985

Nancy never has to wonder what Barb would have to say about this whole thing with Steve and Jonathan, because she's usually only a few feet away and constantly gives her grief about it.

She is long past the point of wondering if she's insane or if the Upside Down did something to her when she crossed over that night in the woods. It's a moot point, because it's not like she's going to tell anyone about it. Besides, if there's one thing she can do well (and there isn't just one, there are many, thanks), it's *deal*.

She's dealt with her parents' obvious marital problems her whole life. She's dealt with school and stress and an honest-to-god, man-eating *monster*. So she can deal with seeing the ghost of her dead best friend, okay?

There's no way to tell if she's real or a figment of her imagination, but Nancy chooses to believe the former. She has to; she missed Barb too much to believe anything else.

Barb flicks an insubstantial finger through the corner of the Barron's test prep book.

"And to think, my parents had me studying for this since before I was a freshman, and I'll never know how I'd have done."

She's clearly in a bad mood today, because she doing her whole death look. The left lens of her glasses is shattered and blood keeps dripping down from her nose. It splatters on the tabletop like the world's most gruesome Jackson Pollack imitation before fading from view after a few seconds.

This Barb can bleed eternally.

Nancy glances to the door of the study room to see if anyone's near and then whispers, "You cannot possibly tell me that you are jealous

that I have to study for the SAT.”

And Barb gives her this *look*, the one she used to reserve for particularly ugly blouses and the first time Nancy admitted she kind-of-maybe liked Steve Harrington.

“Okay, that was a stupid thing to say,” Nancy says after a moment.

She taps her mechanical pencil against the open book and sighs. Her mental checklist is weighing on her, all *study for SAT, study for midterms, practice her Forensics speech, edit her college essay, double-check with Mrs. Haraway about her recommendation letter*. The weight of it all is making her thoughtless, making her forget that Barb doesn’t have to do any of it because Barb will never graduate high school, never go to college.

“I’m sorry,” she says. She bites her lip and angles a look up in time to see Barb, looking normal again, mime a shoulder bump. They share a wistful smile.

The study room door opens and Jonathan walks in. His backpack is bulging and its zipper looks precariously close to giving up. He looks right at her, eyes direct in a way he’s only managed with consistency in the past few months, and smiles.

Barb makes a faint scoffing noise, but Nancy doesn’t glance away from him. Barb has held a grudge against Jonathan ever since he narrowly beat her to first place in the Hawkins science fair in the seventh grade, though she refuses to admit that’s the reason.

“I was starting to think you’d abandoned me to watch the game,” Nancy says lightly.

“Your boyfriend certainly tried his best. He parked my car into a corner. Had to drive over a curb just to get out.” He digs into his ragged backpack and pulls out a stack of books. A chewed-up pen cap springs free and skitters across the tabletop, but he doesn’t notice. Barb makes a face and tries to flick it away from her to no avail.

He does that a lot when it’s just the two of them — refers to Steve as *her boyfriend*. She’s never been able to tell which of them he is trying

to remind.

“But you manfully resisted his advances and came to study with me instead,” she says, sharp eyes catching the way his hands stutter slightly before flipping open a notebook.

When he meets her eyes again, his face is carefully blank. He shrugs like it’s nothing. “No place I’d rather be.”

And maybe she loves him a little, because he actually means that. Jonathan gets what it’s like to genuinely enjoy studying. She wonders if he thinks about it the same way she does. If having knowledge and understanding of the world lock firmly into place beneath his feet feels like he’s building a road out of Hawkins, one book and test at a time.

She clears her throat and sits up straight. “Okay, so — I was thinking we’d tackle Quant Comp questions first? I got three of them wrong on my last practice test, which is just unacceptable.”

She pulls out a sheaf of photocopied problems from her math binder and hands him a copy. There is no reason for their fingers to brush in the hand-off, but it happens anyway.

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A quiet hour passes in the study room, marked mostly by the rustle of paper and occasional exchange of glances. Nancy has achieved a sort of zen-like state of satisfaction. The nub on her middle finger has turned slightly red from where her pencil has been resting against it, and in the past twenty minutes, Jonathan has forgotten himself enough to leave his foot nudged up against hers beneath the table.

“Please tell me you are not playing footsie with *Jonathan Byers*,” Barb says from the doorway of the room. She’d wandered off for a while, but the library probably holds little potential for entertainment when you can’t pick up a book or flip a page.

Nancy glances at Jonathan to see if he’s looking. He’s got his head ducked down over his math textbook, so she turns and fixes Barb with a glare.

Except Barb's no longer in the doorway; Steve is.

"Whoa, hey," he says, lifting his hands up defensively. Out of the corner of her eye, she sees Jonathan head jerk up. "I swear I'm not here to interrupt your love affair with color-coded notes."

It's not like she can explain why she'd been glaring, so she just goes with it. "Are you here to study?" She eyes his person pointedly; he isn't carrying anything except a handheld radio and a pair of headphones.

He waves the radio like it's a signed and sworn affidavit to his character. "Game's going kind of lousy. Thought I could keep you guys company while listening to the rest of it."

"Keep *us* company?" She smiles. "Steve, it's okay to admit if this is a cry for help. Were you afraid of what you might do if the Cardinals lose?"

He rolls his eyes ostentatiously and pulls out the chair beside her. As he slouches down in it, he catches Jonathan's eye and grins brightly.

"Nice moves in the parking lot earlier, man. Didn't think your car's engine had that kind of kick behind it."

Jonathan looks back down to his notebook and mutters, "Well, I'm not looking forward to checking the undercarriage later."

Steve shrugs. "My uncle's got that shop down on Oak. Bring it by, we can hoist it up."

And Nancy should be concerned about getting waylaid from studying for the rest of the evening, but to her surprise Steve just kicks his feet up onto the table and pops his headphones on without another word.

Nancy exchanges a look with Jonathan; he shrugs and so they turn their attention back to their books.

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Ever since she first kissed Steve — bouncing off walls, his grin huge and disbelieving even as his mouth dove down again and again — it's

always been the same; whenever he is out of her sight, she regains a measure of perspective and wonders just what the hell she is doing.

It's just. They're not exactly *compatible*. His hobbies bore her and her hobbies baffle him. His best chance at going to university is through an athletic scholarship, while she is applying to an assortment of Ivies and private colleges across the country. Sometimes she thinks it might have all just been a fling, if it hadn't been for the Upside Down.

Because it was hard to forget the fact that when the time came to run, Steve *turned back*.

It's not gratitude, what she feels for Steve. It's not even admiration, because he isn't a guy you *admire* so much as ruefully appreciate. She can't explain it, not to Barb, not to her mother or Mike, not even really to herself — but the fact is, she's just more content when he's around.

It's a quiet feeling, but it's sincere in a way she doesn't think most people would get. She thinks maybe that's how love is supposed to work.

But it's different with Jonathan. *That* bothers her.

—

Steve's trying to behave, but eventually he can't hide his agony. It comes out in a low, miserable groan that he muffles into his folded arms.

Nancy absently reaches over and pats him in the middle of the back and then goes back to her quadratic formula. Jonathan gives him a more sympathetic look, but only because Steve's head is down and he can't see it.

Ten minutes later, Steve yanks his headphones down around his neck and sighs. "Well that's it. We're done for."

"Didn't you win the first two games?" She asks, puzzled.

Steve shakes his head at her evident naivety. "They've got a foothold

now. They've stolen the momentum. It's all over."

She steals a look at Jonathan, at a loss for the right thing to say in the face of such blatantly irrational pessimism.

Say something, she mouths at him.

He looks startled by the very idea. *Like what?* His hand gestures ask.

She glares. *Anything*.

"Boys are so pathetic," Barb says, appearing in the chair beside Jonathan and giving him an unimpressed look. "They can't say anything nice to each other without worrying about cooties. God knows what it's doing to you to spend so much time with them."

"Uh," Jonathan clears his throat. "I'm sure tomorrow's game will go better."

Steve raises his head and looks at him with sad, dull eyes. But he's listening, at least.

Jonathan glances at Nancy and tries again. "We'll watch it together. You know, for luck." He accompanies the word *luck* with a vague gesture, like it's a concept he's read about in a book somewhere but never seen any supporting evidence of.

Steve, who had been starting to perk up halfway through Jonathan's uninspired offering, suddenly deflates again. "Can't do my house. My parents are having a dinner party."

"Well, my parents are definitely going to be home tomorrow, so it can't be mine either," Nancy says. After a moment they both turn and look across the table at Jonathan, who stares back in blatant horror.

Steve's shoulders start to collapse inward.

"Okay, fine," Jonathan says, too loud. He looks away, out the study room window. "I guess we can watch it at my house."

Steve lets out a *whoop!* and bounds to his feet, grabbing Nancy up in a hug and all the while pointing at Jonathan and shouting, "Yes! Yes,

it is *on!*”

Over Steve’s shoulder, she sees the librarian heading their way, face pinched into a disapproving frown. Oh god, if Steve gets her kicked out of the library, she is so dumping him.

“I honestly just don’t get the appeal,” Barb says from the corner of the room. But then, Barb had been a late bloomer; she died before she ever got around to being interested in boys.

4. Game 4 of the 1985 World Series aka Wednesday, October 23, 1985

“Your mom’s not gonna mind that it’s past midnight, right?” Steve asks. He pulls over to the side of the street, just far enough down to be out of direct view of her house.

He knows the whole out-late-on-a-school-night is one of those things some parents care about. But it’s kind of baffling that anyone wouldn’t trust Nancy, who is like the most responsible person to ever walk the earth. She volunteered to be hall monitor in the *fourth grade*. She *organizes* her *locker*.

It’s a good thing he doesn’t let the mysteries of the world get to him, otherwise he’d have to think more about things like the tension between Nancy and her mom, or that time an eight-foot-tall walking Venus Flytrap tried to eat them all.

“It’s fine,” Nancy says. “She knows I was studying at the library until closing, so she’s kind of going easy on me.”

Steve twists in his seat rapid-fast. “How does she know you were there until closing? Does she have the librarian in her pocket?”

Nancy bites her lip. Her eyes flick to the side and back, like they always do when she thinks something he’s said is hilarious but doesn’t want to admit it. It’s kinda this unspoken private joke between the two of them.

Nancy pats him on the knee. “I told her I would be, and she’s trying this new thing where she trusts what I say.”

He props his arm against the steering wheel and leans forward over the gear shift. He smiles at her. “You lie to her all the time.”

“Yes, but that’s a teenager’s prerogative. Doesn’t mean she has any right to be suspicious.” She glances down the street. “Okay, but I really do have to go now.”

She darts forward and gives him a quick kiss, one of those absent-

minded short pecks that somehow make him feel both invincible and like an old married person at the same time.

Maybe he is an old married person at eighteen. It would explain why he keeps an honest-to-god photo in his wallet (Nancy in her softball uniform from last spring, he'd begged her to keep the hat on the next time they had sex and she'd laughed at him, said he had a *problem* but she did it just the same, which is great because there's nothing he loves more than laughing during sex, so). Also, it totally explains why he's decided he's okay with them being swingers.

He wonders if he should buy a pair of bell-bottoms. He thinks he could pull it off.

"Steve?" Nancy ducks down to peer at him through the passenger side window. "Are you okay? You have the weirdest look on your face right now."

He flashes her a broad smile. "Just thinking about tomorrow night."

And Nancy, beautiful Nancy, she just gives him a puzzled look before dashing off across the lawn.

He waits until she steps through the door of her house before pulling away from the curb, because he's a total gentleman and also because the dark is a terrifying void of endless unknown dangers.

—

Everything is awesome from the moment practice after school lets out. His hot shower in the locker room is awesome. The way Tommy slips on the floor and loses hold of his towel is awesome. Even the hour spent in the library is kind of awesome, but only because Nancy agrees to do the flash card thing again.

Then he steps inside the Byers house for the first time in a year and a half and everything is the *opposite of awesome*.

Steve falters. The dim interior glitches and for just a moment he's jumping through the air, Christmas lights twinkling incongruously above as his heart does its best to chisel its way out from beneath his breastbone —

"Steve?" A soft, cool hand cups his cheek and he blinks down at Nancy. He's got his back flat against the wall, and everything looks normal again. Her eyes are full of understanding, so at least that makes one of them.

"Are you okay? I know it can be a lot."

He clears his throat and straightens up. Runs a hand through his hair and says in a voice approximating normal, "I'm cool." He looks around the house with new eyes and can't help but add, "Jesus, how does he live here?"

"It helps to have happy memories of the place too," Jonathan says, appearing beside them. He glances uneasily from Steve to Nancy. "Sorry, I should have warned him," he says to her.

She brushes a quick hand against his arm. "No — it's my fault."

"It's just been so long — "

"Really, it's okay, I completely forgot too."

And that's enough of that, seriously.

"Jesus guys," Steve pushes off the wall and steps past the two of them. "Don't worry about it. No big deal." He takes in the living room with satisfaction: the couch they'll all soon be sitting on and the TV they'll all soon be celebrating in front of. He spins around and gives a loud game clap.

"All right, let's do this. Where's the beer?"

Nancy and Jonathan look back at him a little helplessly. But that's all right; he came prepared. One does not hang out with these two after a year and a half and not learn a thing or two.

"Don't worry," he reassures, placing an almost fatherly hand on their respective shoulders. "I brought some backups in the car."

—

It takes two trips of him conveniently forgetting something in the

kitchen before he is able to attain the seating arrangements he desires. When he does, he feels like a chess master who's just been kinged.

He grins and leans back in his seat, throwing up an arm alongside the back and using the other to raise a beer to his lips. After a moment he notices Jonathan looking at him with a quirked brow.

"What?" He asks.

Jonathan shakes his head, resigned. "Nothing." He leans forward slightly, so his shoulders are no longer brushing Steve's hand. It puts him a little closer to Nancy on the other side of the couch, so really, win-win.

The game goes great. They score early in the second, pick up another in the third and all the while John Tudor's getting the job done and shutting the Royals out. Steve feels himself slowly relaxing into the sofa cushions. Even the evil Venus Flytrap couldn't ruin his mood right now; if it stops by, he's got his best two sidekicks to help him chase it off.

After they score again in the fifth inning, Jonathan casts him a glance and says dryly, "Contrary to what everyone has probably said, smug isn't a good look on you."

"This isn't smug," he says, waving a hand at his face. "This is *happy*. Ask Nancy, she knows because I look like this every day I'm with her." That sounded pretty smooth.

Nancy says without looking up from her book, "You look smug every day you're with me."

Jonathan turns back to him with a triumphant look, but before Steve can protest, Tudor has handed the Royals a third out and the Cards are back up to bat.

Nancy tried to ask him once why he loved baseball, but he didn't have the words. He doesn't understand any of the things he loves; it's part of why he loves them. With understanding comes expectations and fear. If he tried to break down and analyze what it was about a

perfect home run that got his blood jumping, it might stop working and just — why complicate things?

He can't stay in his seat all through the ninth. They're only up three and anything can happen in baseball, all it takes is the right hit when the bases are loaded and none of the other eight innings would be worth a damn.

"It's making me nervous just watching him," he hears Nancy say. She gets up and walks — somewhere, he doesn't see where. And that messes with some plan or other, but really, what does it matter at the moment.

But Tudor holds up. They completely shutout the Royals. Steve watches the team celebrating on the field, feeling his stomach flip.

"We're one game from winning the World Series," he says. He turns and stares at Jonathan, who's grinning and looking pretty happy (for Jonathan).

It sparks something in him, that smile, sets off a cascade of adrenaline he'd been storing those last few minutes. He thinks something like, *anything can happen in baseball*, and then he's reaching out and pulling the other boy's mouth over his.

It lasts only a second or two or a hundred, then Jonathan's making a faint shocked noise and Steve realizes what he's doing. Who he's kissing.

He opens his eyes and nearly goes cross-eyed staring at the face in front of him, the floppy sweep of sandy hair defiantly sitting in the place where there is supposed a neat coif of dark brown. A pair of eyes that are normally half-lidded and glancing now wide and fixed unerringly on his own.

They both jerk back and stare at each other.

"What?" Steve says loudly. Then he remembers Nancy and spins to look at her, only half-aware that Jonathan does the same.

She stares back at them from the kitchen doorway. Silence reigns.

“Oh, wow, this didn’t go the way I planned,” Steve says eventually, dragging an agitated hand through his hair. In his head the looping thought *what did you just do* is starting to reach a feverish pitch.

“You. Had a *plan*?” Nancy says haltingly.

“Yes, I had a plan!” He points to them each in turn, the stab of his finger almost accusing. “You two were supposed to kiss. Not — ” he gestures wildly at himself. He can’t even say it, it’s so *weird*.

At the news, Jonathan does a double-take and splutters, and Steve despairs a little. God love him, but Jonathan’s a weirdo. He barely blinks at Steve laying one on him but the idea of kissing a girl has him blushing like a freshman sneaking into prom.

He pauses and goes over that thought a second time, specifically the part *where he kissed Jonathan oh jesus christ*.

He drags a hand down his face. “I don’t know what just happened.”

Nancy folds her arms and sits primly on the arm of the recliner. “Well you better figure it out, Steve, because you’re kind of the only one who can tell us.”

Jonathan, finally regaining the power of speech, angles his head past Steve and says to her, “You want to rely on *him* to figure this out?”

Nancy fixes him with a hard look. “Yes. He’s capable of it, he just needs to be pushed.”

“No, Jonathan’s right,” Steve says feebly, collapsing on the couch. “I can’t do this.”

Oh, great, now Jonathan’s looking guilty.

(He *kissed* him.)

“Steve,” Nancy says, recalling his attention. When he looks over, she is pinching the bridge of her nose. “You said you had a plan, that — that you wanted Jonathan and I to kiss. Is this you trying to break up with me and just let me down easy?”

And now *she* won't look at him. Steve's really hitting it out of the park tonight.

"No," he says, leaning forward with his hands outstretched. She shies away from them. "God, no, Nance. I thought, uh, swingers. We could be swingers. Thought you two would like it." He forcibly stops himself from talking before the word *bell-bottoms* can fall out of his mouth. Too soon for that, probably.

(*He kissed him.*)

Now that it's all out there in the open, his plan sounds a little far-fetched. Neither Nancy nor Jonathan seem to be able to formulate a response.

With his lips still tingling and an unfamiliar hot shame pooling in his stomach, Steve stares mournfully at the dark TV screen and thinks *maybe I should have waited until after the World Series.*

5. Game 5 of the 1985 World Series aka Thursday, October 24, 1985

An hour and a half before he has to be at school, Jonathan wakes up with a smile on his face. It takes him a few seconds to notice its presence, but when he does, he blinks muzzily up at the ceiling of his room. He feels the unfamiliar stretch of his mouth and wonders why the hell it's there.

It's definitely a Thursday, and therefore he definitely needs to go to school. He has a quiz in AP Chem, a speech to give in Communications, and a basketball game in PE. These latter two are accompanied by the ignominy of him being one of the few seniors in both classes; he put off requisites for three years with the futile hope that the school may eventually see reason and waive them. They did not.

The point is, there is absolutely nothing to smile about today.

"You're in a good mood, Jonathan," his mother says as she bustles by the kitchen table.

He hunches over his cereal bowl defensively, but doesn't withhold the small smile she pulls from him. He guesses it's not so bad, letting his mother think him happy.

"I bet it's because Nancy was here last night," Will says.

Jonathan's smile snaps off, realization dismantling his early morning fog.

"Did you finally kiss her?" his little brother continues, mugging a little for their mother's benefit.

Will's reached that age where he's finally starting to betray him in small ways. If Jonathan was a normal brother, he'd probably kick him under the table. But it's too good to see him amused by *something*, even if it's his pathetic big brother, because at least it means he's not flinching or shaking silently with nerves as he stares unseeing at the wall.

So Jonathan ducks his head and says, “Course not. We’re just friends.”

—

He lets Will have control of the radio on the drive in to school, since Thursdays are his turn. He regrets his generosity when Will settles on the variety station and The Cars are playing.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Jonathan mutters.

Will throws him a strange look. “What?”

“Nothing, never mind.” He slouches in the driver’s seat and grips the steering wheel. He gets through about thirty seconds before the chorus hits. Will twists the volume knob up.

“She’s my best friend’s girl,” Will sings. He’s off-key, which is what Jonathan should expect from the inadvertent soundtrack to his life. *“And she used to be mine — ”*

Jonathan reaches over and switches the radio off.

He glances at Will’s confused face and tries to shrug in an appropriately apologetic manner. “Got a headache.”

He focuses back on the road, and tries not to think really stupid thoughts, like how he absolutely cannot wonder about his best friend’s girl, or how he doesn’t know if that phrase applies to Steve or Nancy.

—

He sees her first, because they share first period.

He throws his books down on his desk and immediately turns in his seat to face her. She doesn’t look up from her AP Chem book.

“Nancy, are you — ”

“Could we not?” She says quickly, like she’d been waiting for it. She glances up and gives him a small, strained smile. “We have that quiz

later, and I didn't get much studying done."

Her tone ends weirdly, like she meant to finish the sentence with *last night* but stopped herself before the words could come out.

Jonathan watches her for a moment after she returns her attention to the textbook. Her hair and blouse are in perfect order. She doesn't look like she had trouble sleeping (but makeup seems to be kind of like magic in that way, so who knows). It all amounts to her looking perfectly put together, but Jonathan can't shake the awful gut sensation that she's miserable.

He turns back to his own books. He's definitely not smiling anymore.

Steve finds him at lunch, which is a little odd, because they don't usually eat together. They may be friends, and most of the school knows about it, but it's not something they flaunt. They'll talk in the hallways and sit next to each other during study hall, but lunch is whole different category.

Steve usually sits in the cafeteria with fragments of his old crowd, and Jonathan switches it up between the dark room, library, and the bleachers outside. It's an arrangement that suits them both, he figures. Steve can have his dose of normalcy and Jonathan gets to have some of that alone time he's found harder to come by as of late.

Nancy has a different lunch period. He doesn't know where or who she sits with.

He's on the bleachers today. It's a little cold, but they'd had a long summer. The chill is mostly welcome.

He chews slowly through his sandwich and watches, bemused, as Steve wades up through the metal rows to reach him.

If he had an inkling that Nancy might be miserable, he has no doubt that Steve is; everything about the other boy is sort of — slumped. His shoulders, the slant of his mouth. Even his hair is kind of sadly drooping.

Jonathan's not sure what to do. He's never been the peppy one in the group.

"Hey," Steve says, collapsing on the bench next to Jonathan. He's clutching a sandwich in a plastic bag in his left hand, which is strange. It makes this whole thing look premeditated.

"Hey." Jonathan studies him for a second longer, carefully not lingering on his mouth, before asking, "You talk to her yet?"

Steve shakes his head, eyes downcast. "She hasn't been to her locker between periods. I'm starting to think she has some kind of secret bunker where she keeps back-up copies of her textbooks."

"Well, she just might," Jonathan says. "It is Nancy."

He thinks it should be uncomfortable, sitting next to Steve right now. They kissed last night. They should probably talk about that. But that's just the way of things, with the three of them — if two of them are together, it seems like all they can really talk about is the third who isn't present.

Still. They did kiss. They should probably talk about it. Jonathan takes a moment to marvel at the turn his life has taken. He doesn't want to have a conversation about human sexuality with Steve Harrington. He probably doesn't even know the word *bisexual*. For all Jonathan knows, Steve's mind spent last night bouncing between *straight* and *gay* like a manic pinball.

He sighs. "How did we even wind up here. You and me, I mean. You have to admit, it's pretty weird."

Steve could be abducted by aliens and he'd probably still insist on pretending his life was completely normal. True to form, the next words out of his mouth are:

"Well, we battled a monster together. That's gotta be first base at least."

When Jonathan stares at him, Steve appears to repeat the words to himself and then hurriedly clarifies, "First base of *friendship*."

Jonathan can't seem to force his eyebrows down. "Right. Of course."

They both hurriedly take large bites out of their respective sandwiches so they won't have to speak.

Jonathan wishes Nancy was here. She was always good at forcing issues. Steve tended to wander and Jonathan spent most of any conversation looking for the exits. This was always going to be a disaster.

"I think I need to talk to Nancy before we can figure anything out," Steve says.

Jonathan nods in emphatic agreement and that's that.

They might be in the middle of a crisis of friendship and sex or whatever, but Jonathan knows that won't stop Nancy from showing up to their study session at the library after school. Jonathan's coming in a little late, having put in two hours at work under Mr. Johnson's gruff supervision.

He listens to the game on the radio as he drives over to the library. Willie Wilson scores just as he pulls into the parking lot, and he spends the next five minutes sitting in his car as the engine ticks cool.

This was supposed to be the Cards' victory night, but it's near the end of the second inning and they're already down by three. He pictures Steve watching the game alone at his house and immediately wishes he hadn't.

"Stop being such a fucking idiot," he says aloud in the quiet of the car. He forces himself up out of the seat and slams the door behind him.

"Royals just got a triple," he says by way of greeting when he walks into their study room.

"Do *not* talk to me about the world series right now," Nancy says without looking up from her books.

Right.

He gets down to his own studying, but he finds it impossible to focus. Every time he glances up to check on Nancy, she is frowning down at her notebook. The thin line between her eyebrows is the only outward sign that she's stressed.

He read somewhere that men were better at compartmentalizing, but he thinks whoever came up with that shit has never actually met a teenage girl.

Eventually he gets fed up with pretending. He's not Steve; he's not going to let her avoid the situation with no push back.

"Okay, this is ridiculous," he says finally. He throws his pen to the table and watches her eyes stop moving along a line of text. "I can't study until we clear the air."

"Sounds like you should try harder," she says evenly.

"Are you angry with me?" He asks, throwing the question out there like it doesn't make his stomach twist.

She finally looks up, too startled to do anything but meet his eyes. "No, of course not."

"Well you're sure acting like it," he says. He folds his arms and leans them on the table. "Look, I talked to him earlier and he was pretty messed up about everything — "

"Oh, my boyfriend's upset because he got caught kissing someone else?" Nancy asks, eyes wide. "Now I feel *terrible*."

"You know that's not what I meant. And what do you mean 'got caught'? You saw his face, it's not like he wasn't surprised too."

"He also said he'd been planning this for a while."

"Nancy," Jonathan says slowly, "this is *Steve* we're talking about."

Nancy buries her face in her hands. As far as reactions go, he figures that's about right.

He tries to gentle his tone. As with everything in his life, he's pretty sure the actual result is just an exponential increase in awkwardness. "Look, I can't figure this out without you. We can't. You should've heard us earlier, it was downright painful."

She drops her hands and to his relief her eyes are completely dry. At his words, her mouth twitches slightly in what might one day be a smile. She doesn't speak, but at least she's listening.

Jonathan steels himself. "What Steve did was a shock to everyone. But I don't think it's exactly been a secret to anyone that I — you know. You."

God why is he so bad at this. He must really be crazy about her. There's no other explanation for why he would be willingly creating a memory to kick himself over for years to come.

"Yes, great, everyone has feelings," Nancy says, flustered and clearly annoyed about being flustered. "It's just that I thought there was a mutual unspoken agreement to not talk about them."

A funny wave of comprehension crests. Jonathan blinks slowly, his own humiliation forgotten.

"What do you mean 'everyone has feelings'?"

And when Nancy startles and stares at him, stricken, Jonathan can only think that it's a hell of a thing, having life-changing revelations when there's still calc homework to do.

6. Game 6 of the 1985 World Series aka Saturday, October 26, 1985

But first: Friday, October 25, 1985

For as long as she can remember — well, okay, at least since sixth grade when her closest cousin graduated — Nancy has known that high school wasn't *real*. It's how she survived it: always looking past the drama and stupidity of the locker-and-linoleum-edged world and on to the shining promise of college. High school, she always thought, didn't count.

Well. *Some* things counted. Things like grades and test scores, teachers who might write recommendation letters, extracurricular achievements and awards. Those all counted. Obviously.

"I think you're obsessing over your tests to avoid thinking about real life," Barb says from the bed. She's on her back, hanging upside down off the edge like they used to do when they were nine and could somehow have fun doing literally *anything* so long as it was together.

"Don't be a hypocrite, you did too," Nancy says. She's sitting at her desk, books spread out in front of her. She's ignoring that it's Friday night, and she's definitely *not* looking at the clock on her bedside table.

They had plans to go shopping for Halloween costumes tonight. All week, Steve has been waffling between going as Starsky (but only if she agreed to be Hutch; he'd grabbed her hips, started to sway, and said in a tone she *thinks* he intended as romantic, "you can't have one without the other, Nance, it just doesn't work") or Peter Gabriel (but only if he could find a bat wings headband ala the Genesis 1972 *Foxtrot* tour). Jonathan was going to come along, even though he had no intention of dressing up. The night was destined to be long and unproductive. Nancy had been looking forward to it.

Barb says, "But I now have the great wisdom of the dead. It's given me perspective."

Nancy's reply is unthinking, mind still half on costume shopping. "So, what, the grass is greener on the other side?"

"No, it's dark and full of monsters on the other side," Barb says, voice cold and strange.

Nancy looks up in time to see her blip corpselike, all mottled blood-specked skin and terrified rictus. The next second she is back to normal, placid face haloed by bright red hair that never felt the burden of gravity.

"You need to decide what you want," Barb continues, as if nothing had happened.

Nancy turns back to the desk and carefully winds her hands together to hide how they are shaking. Suddenly her relationship problems seem incredibly silly.

An omission from earlier: Barb had counted too.

No one really seems to realize what Nancy's missing. If it weren't for the occasional glimpse she gets of Barb's parents around town, she'd think her best friend had always been a delusion. As a result, the grief has been stifled, tucked into the corners of her life to make way for parents and classes and boys.

It's easier to pretend to forget about Barb when Steve and Jonathan are around. And maybe that makes her selfish, but she'd rather be that than sad.

It's just — she'll never get to know if their friendship would have lasted. If they'd be those women who still talked on the phone when they were 40 and going through their second divorce or if they'd go to separate colleges and just quietly slip away from each other. That's what gets Nancy — not just the murder of potential, but the deep line of what ifs.

"Barb," she hears herself ask. "Are you really here?"

She doesn't know what she wants to hear, but all she can feel is disappointment when Barb raises her head and says, "Oh, Nancy. How the hell am I supposed to know?"

Saturday, October 26, 1985

"I've been giving it some thought," Barb says. "And I don't see why you can't date both of them. I mean, if you're absolutely determined to continue to associate with those two, you might as well go all in."

She is on the bed again, but this time sitting up and pouring over the array of magazine pages Nancy had spread out for her.

Nancy twists in her seat and stares at her. "I can't do that."

"Why not?"

She doesn't even know how to put it into words. "It's just — people don't go around dating multiple people. Maybe in like New York or LA. Or Utah. But that kind of weirdness doesn't happen in *Indiana*." Said the girl to her best friend who was killed by a monster in a parallel dimension.

"Weird things can happen anywhere. Look at Jeffrey Dahmer, he was from Wisconsin."

Nancy frowns. "Who?"

Barb waves a hand. "Sorry, that hasn't happened yet. Bad example anyway. I don't mean to equate dating those guys with serial murder and cannibalism."

Now Nancy is seriously unsettled. "*What?*"

She's about to inquire further when she looks up and sees in the mirror a figure climbing through her window.

She jumps and knocks the desk hard. Papers, pens, and highlighters go flying. She thinks about bending to collect them, but instead whirls around and glares at Steve, who immediately puts his hands up.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to scare you.”

She’s pulled in two directions. She wants to say that he didn’t scare her but she doesn’t know how to explain that she was a little jumpy because of the phantasm of her undead best friend. So she says nothing and continues to glare. Sometimes silence is an effective tool; she’s learned that from Jonathan.

Steve drops his hands, and his shoulders with them. “Do you want me to go?”

“Please say yes, please say yes,” Barb chants from the bed.

“No, I guess we should talk,” Nancy says, relenting. “But we have to be quiet, my parents are home.”

Steve immediately mimes zipping his mouth shut and throwing away the key. She tilts her head but decides to let the moment pass without comment. He looks around the room, eyes lingering briefly over the deconstructed magazine covering her bedspread.

“Can we sit?” He asks, and moves to sit on the bed. Barb narrows her eyes but doesn’t move.

“No,” Nancy says hastily. “No, I think I’d prefer to stand for this.”

It’s only when Steve’s face falls that she realizes how harsh that sounded, but she doesn’t know what she can say to soften or explain it. She shifts uneasily on her feet.

“How’d the game go?” She asks, a tad desperately. She determinedly ignores the pitying look Barb gives her.

Steve shakes his head, looking even more morose. “It looked like we might seal the deal in the eighth but then the umpire made this complete *bullshit* call on Orta — he was out, he was *clearly* out.” He runs a hand through his hair in agitation. “I rewound the tape after the game and it was *so* obvious. We just got cheated out of a win, and now we have to go on to a seventh game after being one away for the past two. The momentum is *not* with us, and honestly Nance, I’m starting to think we might blow it.”

His breathing is a little ragged by the end.

Nancy only says, “You recorded the game?”

He stares at her. “Of course I did. I thought it was going to be series final. I wanted to be able to watch it again.”

She can't for the life of her imagine sitting through a game she not only knows the result of, but has actually already watched.

On the bed, Barb ostentatiously rests her chin on her hand and watches them both with bright-eyed interest. In that absence of other stimuli, Nancy's life has become some kind of sitcom to her.

Steve regains a little of his composure. He straightens up. “But I didn't come here to talk about the series. I haven't seen you since Wednesday, and I was trying to give you space to think, but then I realized maybe I should make sure you had all the facts. So, you know, it could be an informed — think.” He shoves his hands in his pockets. “Okay, look. First thing I should say, I guess, is that I love you. You know that, right? That I love you?”

The first time Steve told her he loved her, it was around Christmas after the nightmare incident with Jonathan's little brother. He was dropping her off at her car at the end of the night. He'd taken a deep breath, looked her dead in the eyes, and said the words like he was reading very carefully from a teleprompter. She remembers feeling surprised and a little wry but in a fond way (an emotional mixture that by then she knew was par for the course with Steve). Her response had been to draw him close with a hand on the back of his neck and kiss the hell out of him.

He said it again on New Year's. He'd parked his car at a spot high up overlooking the quarry. It had been an hour after midnight and they were curled up in the backseat under a blanket. She'd tucked her face against the junction of his neck and shoulder and squeezed his waist tight.

The third time, it was early spring and she was trying on her softball uniform for the first time. She'd thrown her cleats at his head.

It's been almost two years and she's lost track of the number and settings. She's never said it back, not once. She's thought about it (constantly), but it's never felt right. She doesn't want to say the words unless she knows with certainty that they're true.

It's just — they're in *high school*. People don't fall in love in high school, not for real. It seemed so obvious to her that those who claim to be lying or deluded. She's seen enough pretend love between her own parents, seen how *I love you* can become a cage.

She isn't about to make the same mistakes as her mother. She'd rather die before she does that.

But Steve is looking at her expectantly, so she says, "Yes, I know." Because even after the craziness of the past couple days, she does.

He nods, looking relieved, which only makes things worse. This would all be so much easier if she could write him off as an asshole. But she's two years past being able to do that with any honesty.

She decides to just address the problem head on. "What I don't understand is that you thought you could just — share me. Like some kind of cool toy."

"Exactly, yes, *thank you*," Barb says.

Steve looks badly confused. "I don't — *what?*"

"I know you and Jonathan have gotten a lot closer," she says, realizing even as she says it that it's an understatement of ludicrous proportions, given what happened Wednesday. "But that doesn't mean you can try to maneuver me into some kind of convenient," she refuses to say *swingers* — "buddy system tag team."

Steve opens and shuts his mouth several times, an unusual show of uncertainty, before he finally says, sounding lost, "It wasn't like that."

She arms her voice with ice and scorn. "Then please tell me. What *exactly* was it like, Steve?"

"Nancy," Steve says. "You like him."

She stares at him, mute.

"I just thought it would make you happy." After a brief pause, he adds, "Both of you."

That's not how things work, is all she can think. Out of the corner of her eye, she can see Barb looking insufferably smug.

"What about you?" She asks. It seems easier than dealing with her own feelings at the moment.

Steve is nonplussed. "What do you mean?"

She folds her arms. "You kissed him. So are you... bisexual?"

"What, like a queer?" When she gives him a flat look, he adds, a shade defensively, "Look, I'm not like you two, okay? I don't feel the need to go running to the Encyclopedia Britannica every time I feel something. I feel it, it exists. End of story."

"It must be so nice," Barb muses, "being a popular rich white boy in Indiana."

"Steve, it's not that simple," Nancy says.

"Well, I think it is," Steve says. The only thing that makes it forgivable is the dead honesty in his voice. But just because it's forgivable doesn't mean it's not frustrating.

"If you can't even put a name to what you are or what you want, how are we supposed to deal with it?"

Barb makes a noise of agreement from the bed.

"I don't see what the one has to do with the other," Steve says. "I didn't know what that monster was when it came climbing out of the ceiling, but that didn't stop me from taking a bat to its face."

"It's fascinating," Barb says. "Sometimes I get these little glimpses of his logic, and they almost make sense."

Nancy puts a hand over her eyes.

“Nancy.”

He steps in close, hands hovering over her shoulders like they're waiting for permission. When she drops her hand and looks up at him, he carefully touches her. All at once, she just wants to just fall against him and forget about everything for awhile. But that's not an option.

Steve seems to disagree, because he draws her in anyway. “I just came over because I needed you to know that, no matter what, I want to be with you. That's the most important thing to me.”

It's too much. She gently hits her forehead against his chest and mutters into his sweater, “I want to be with you too.”

Barb calls over, “That's right, Nance. Baby steps. Keep this up, and someday you might actually be able to say it to his face.”

There's a smile in Steve voice when he says, “That's good to hear.”

She takes a careful breath, breathing in the oddly comforting smell of his laundry detergent and aftershave. “And. I like Jonathan.”

His arms tighten around her. When he speaks, his voice is oddly strangled. “I'm not going to say anything, because I know this is not the right time. But later on, after an appropriate waiting period, I'm totally going to gloat *so hard* about being right for once.”

She sighs.

They stand there in the middle of her room for a long time, just resting against each other. Barb is silent. When Nancy turns her head to peek over, she finds that she has left, disappeared to wherever it is she goes when she's not making embarrassing commentary on Nancy's life.

Steve kisses the top of her head. She smiles and puts her arms around his waist.

He murmurs tenderly, “So this means you're coming to my house to watch the final game tomorrow, right?”

And all Nancy can think is, thank god Barb wasn't here for that one.

7. Game 7 of the 1985 World Series aka Sunday, October 27, 1985

Steve loiters by the front door, waiting for his parents to leave. He thinks there should be a word for a sort of *reverse* usher. Someone responsible for escorting people out of a place, but not like in a bouncer kind of way. Just in a 'please leave before people I want to kiss show up and this gets awkward' kind of way.

"...and you left dishes out last time. Don't make me come home to a sink full of dishes, Steven."

Last time he'd left dishes out, it had been because he was busy having a minor crisis of sexuality. But he doesn't think his mom would be very understanding about that.

"I won't," he says.

His dad looks disgruntled and kind of constipated. He doesn't want to go to the dinner party. But Steve is relieved; watching the Cards with him for the past two games has been a real drag. His dad doesn't know how to enjoy baseball properly. He spent the entirety of both games criticising the players, the coach, the umps (though, okay, he had a point there because *fuck* the umps).

Steve had mostly just sat silently on the coach during all this, shoulders tensing up. He didn't really realize it until he stopped hanging out with Tommy and Carol, but they reminded him of his dad a lot.

"You know they're going to screw the game to hell," his dad says as he shrugs on his overcoat.

He smiles tightly. "Yeah, we'll see."

They finally leave and he lets out a breath like he's been holding it for hours.

If he's being honest, the main thing that stopped him from freaking out about the whole wanting-to-kiss-Jonathan thing? His dad. No

way he ends up like him if he's going around kissing dudes.

He's not really an introspective person. He can admit that. It's never occurred to him that it was a problem, except for rare moments in life like now when he suddenly has to maybe rethink his entire perspective on, like, romance and sex and men and women.

He just wishes it hadn't happened during the World Series.

As he waits for the others to arrive, he can't seem to settle down. He's got this nervous energy that won't quit. He sets out drinks and chips and other snacks in the living room, but it all feels like some kind of weird overcompensation. Like, *hey, I don't know what I'm doing but at least there's pretzels.*

Every time he tries to think about Jonathan, his mind skitters away. The whole thing just doesn't jive with his normal understanding of the world; he's not queer. He likes baseball and Nancy, which both seem like two very unqueer (*nonqueer, aqueer?*) things.

He's not worried though; the issue will be forced soon enough when he's here. It's all just more simple when Nancy and Jonathan are in front of him, somehow. He's counting on that.

He puts some music on to pass the time, take his mind off things. He'd spent the previous night making a mixtape for today, and it's just the thing he needs to relax.

—

The doorbell rings ten minutes before the game is due to start. If Steve didn't know better, he'd think the other two were banking on the game distracting him, trying to avoid talking about stuff. God, he hopes not. They can't rely on him to figure all of this out.

He already did the leg work. Kissing Jonathan. Inviting them here. Putting out the pretzels.

He shoves the panic aside and squares his shoulders. In the background, the mixtape switches over to the next song, and he smiles.

"I still believe in us together," he sings and opens the door with a flourish. Nancy and Jonathan are standing on the front step, awkwardly not looking at each other.

They're hopeless. The music pounds at his back, the kind of emotional back-up he's clearly going to need to see this through.

Jonathan looks in at him, face blank. "Is this. Barry Manilow."

"You're not leaving," Nancy says firmly.

"Why would he leave?" Steve asks. He throws his arms around the two of them and pulls them inside.

He may or may not have listened to this song on repeat while Nancy wasn't speaking to him. He wisely doesn't say this or even hint at it.

Nancy'd probably say something about how three days wasn't that long, or that the lines 'somewhere down the road, our roads are gonna cross again' are badly written. She has no poetry in her soul, but that's all right; Steve can provide enough for the two of them. And if Jonathan cooperates, even better. He takes photos of things like streetlights and puddles, that kind of artistic stuff has to mean something, right?

He turns the music down a little so they won't have to shout over it. He promises himself that if they get down to any real action tonight, he'll turn it back up. He's kind of always wanted to fuck to *Sweet Caroline*.

He turns back around to find the other two just standing there, looking at him. He can't *believe* they're making him run this thing.

Well, fine. But jokes on them, because if there's one thing he's learned — learned on the fly: gun in his face, nightmare bulging out of the ceiling, sneakers skidding over gravel to his car, lights going crazy in the house and it's them, it's all about *them* —

sometimes you just gotta know when something's not about you. He waves at them and says grandly, "Okay, have it then."

Nancy is taken aback. "What?"

"I've already kissed you both," he explains patiently. "Seems like you two have some catching up to do."

"If we really try to do this, are you going to keep score?" Jonathan asks.

Of course!

"No," Steve says. They both look at him and he throws his hands up. "Hey, look. You two have been dancing around this thing for like two years. All I'm saying is that before we all figure this out, maybe you should clear the air, or whatever."

Nancy gets that look on her face where she recognizes he's just made a good point but doesn't want to admit it. She been making that face a lot recently. He tries not to feel smug about it. It's destined to be a temporary phase. Once she's gotten over herself, she'll take charge again and he'll back where he belongs, one step behind. That's okay, because he can watch her back better from there.

He flops down on the couch. They continue to look at him, and so he gestures meaningfully at them again. Then he reaches out and grabs a handful of chips from one of the bowls on the coffee table.

Nancy and Jonathan finally look at each other. Nancy shifts on her feet. Jonathan does that thing where he somehow looks like he's fidgeting even though he's deathly still. He glances down at her lips, which she self-consciously bites.

Steve eats a few chips. The crunch sounds really loud in the room. Maybe he should've kept the music volume up. He stops chewing, not wanting to ruin the mood, but then all he can think about is the salty debris on his tongue. He starts chewing again, but like discreetly.

They lean forward at the same time, eyes flickering. They kiss.

Wow. That looks awkward as hell.

Stiff and careful, not at all what either of them are like when they kiss. Well, maybe Jonathan's like that. Hard to judge; Steve almost flunked stats, but even he knows one kiss isn't representative.

They're standing close, but the only place they're touching is at the lips. Nancy's gripping her own elbows, instead of Jonathan's face or shoulders like she should be. And Jonathan's practically tilting his body *away* from her, like an eighth grader trying to conceal a boner.

They break apart and immediately slide their eyes over to Steve, who looks up at them from the couch, deeply confused.

"What? Do you need me to push your heads together or something?"

Jonathan says, "It's just kind of weird with you staring at us like that."

"Well, sorry. But you guys *looked* weird." It was, quite possibly, the least sexy thing he's ever seen. Minus the obvious exceptions like his parents and the monster drooling all over Jonathan's terrified face.

Jonathan half turns away, muttering, "This was a bad idea."

Steve sees the dismay dart across Nancy's face and jumps to his feet.

He messed up. He's been acting like this was all a foregone conclusion, a smoothly running engine, when clearly it's a push-start job. Gotta get the car rolling before the motor will turn over.

He grabs Nancy and tucks her in close to his side. Then he swings the other boy round by the shoulder and plants one on him before he has a chance to think twice.

Jonathan's lips are just as soft and giving as they were last time. Maybe someday they'll reach a point where he doesn't have to take him by surprise, where Jonathan doesn't overthink every move to death.

He deepens the kiss for a moment before pushing out of it. Then he ducks his head and swiftly kisses Nancy. He keeps his other hand on the back of Jonathan's neck in case he has any ideas about booking it, but the muscles under his palm feel curiously lax.

He feels Nancy start to smile under his mouth, and he can't help but smile too. The structure of the kiss breaks down from there, neither of them able to keep it up for longer than a second because they're

grinning too hard.

She pushes him back an inch with her fingertips. She glances at Jonathan and says to Steve, "Okay, I get your point."

Steve tightens his grip on them both. "Do you? 'Cause I know you're both smart, but — "

"Steve," Nancy says, dark eyes on Jonathan, "you taste like salt and vinegar potato chips. You can sit down again."

He releases them and falls back into the sofa cushions. Nancy steps up close to Jonathan, chest to chest, and reaches for his hand. They intertwine their fingers, and something about that must speak to him, because Jonathan only pauses another second before tilting his head and capturing her lips.

It doesn't look weird this time.

Steve smirks slightly and discreetly points the remote around their bodies. The television blips on, channel already set to ABC. The picture resolves on Whitney Herzog's bad-tempered face.

He settles back and gets comfortable.

—

"What is Tudor *doing*," he groans, hands dragging hard down his face, like maybe if he stretches his eyes hard enough, the score will look different.

"Pitching, by a very loose definition of the word," Jonathan offers from the other side of the couch. They've both got their backs against the armrests, bodies angled towards each other.

It's the third and the Cards are already down three. That familiar feeling of dread is creeping over Steve. When Nancy walks back into the room and nears the couch, he doesn't hesitate before slinging an arm around her waist and pulling her down onto his lap. Then he kicks his socked feet up so they're tangled with Jonathan's in the middle of the couch.

She raises her eyebrows at Jonathan. “I feel like a security blanket.”

He smiles back at her openly.

Looking at the two of them is kind of disorienting, because Steve feels like he shouldn’t be upset right now. For some reason, it makes him think of his father.

Not really examining the impulse too closely, he gropes blindly for the remote and switches the television off.

“Hey,” Jonathan says, surprised. “What about the game?”

Nancy waves her hands urgently at Jonathan, but he’s looking at Steve and doesn’t really notice. Steve shrugs up at her apologetically, but she doesn’t see *that*, because she’s looking at Jonathan.

Steve thinks this whole arrangement might mess with their communication for a while.

“It can wait,” Steve says, generously. He smiles at them both.

His resolve only lasts about half an hour, but when he tries to turn the television back on, they hustle him into his bedroom and shove him down on the bed.

He worries for a moment longer about the Cards, but it’s hard to keep the emotion up when Nancy and Jonathan both join him. He decides to let it go and watch the game on tape later.

Besides, he kind of has a good feeling about it.

Notes for the Chapter:

What, you guys didn't really think I was going to finish this story with Steve's [broken heart](#), did you?

Thank you to everyone who's commented on this story and kept cheering it along!